Assignment 2: Critically reflect on your experience of the role play scenarios to identify the key challenges in successful project delivery when working as a team

Introduction

Attempting to analyse the role-play sessions is an interesting task. They were a curious exercise in that, while they were quite useful at getting us to think about a variety of project management related issues, I'm not sure how instructive they were in regard to helping us understand the teamworking aspects of these matters in a way that this assignment suggests was one of their key purposes. The core of this issue was primarily that the sessions simply did not prove to be a particularly accurate representation of how these kinds of meeting often play out in the real world, and I think there were two key reasons for this: the limited direct experience amongst the participants of project management type meetings, and the lack of stakes involved in the outcome of the discussions.

Personal meeting experience

Although I've not personally been involved in any archaeological 'project management' meetings up to this point, I have certainly been a part of plenty of other meetings in my time, though as far as I can recall I'd never chaired one before these sessions. In my current role my meeting schedule entails weekly lab meetings in which we discuss our progress on tasks, and plan the week ahead, and then there are also trimonthly all-company staff meetings; my participation in these is however fairly limited. In the weekly lab meetings, I normally just provide updates on what I've been working on, answer any questions my manager has relating to ongoing projects, and occasionally provide suggestions for how to solve any low-level issues. It's a very casual environment, with a small team who generally get on well with each other, and is more a weekly check in than of any real importance in terms of decision making. In the all-company meetings I am simply not consequential enough to be called upon, nor

have reason to play any significant part. These meetings tend to be where operational issues are discussed, and are usually a little more contentious.

My lack of participation in the main staff meetings isn't of any concern to me, it causes me no anxiety and I'm never sat there wanting to say anything but unable to do so. In time I imagine I will become more of a factor in these meetings, but as a rule I'm not someone who feels any need to interject thoughts on subjects I lack knowledge in, certainly not whilst in a professional setting, and as it stands there is nothing in an archaeological context that I know any more about than anyone else in the unit. In general, the only thing I normally speak on, and I'm listened to with any authority, at ULAS is in my unofficial role as the lab's handyman, as that is something I actually do have experience with, having worked in that role for a number of years prior to becoming an archaeologist.

My chairing session

As far as the role-play sessions went, my chairing session was the first one and I wasn't quite sure how the exercises were intended to go, but it wasn't really a situation that made me nervous in the way it seemed to make a few of the others in the cohort. I had a structured exercise to guide us through, and being the chair lowered the need for me to have intelligent thoughts on the topic; I simply had to draw such thoughts out of other people. In a situation like this where there's a degree of inexperience among the participants with the matter being discussed it seemed best to have bouncing off points for the discussion, and so I largely used the prompts set out in the exercise for this, and then gave people room to have their say, nothing fancy. This approach seemed to work reasonably well in terms of getting input from as many members of the group as possible, however it's questionable whether it can be considered a successful meeting as I failed to direct us towards firm answers to any of the questions, or a concrete project proposal. It was perhaps more an assemblage of good ideas than anything particularly actionable.

In part this failure was due to poor time management that was a consequence of leaving things so open that people basically continued to provide responses until they were out of ideas. This meant that upon becoming aware that we'd gone past the fifteen-minute mark

we'd been given as guideline, that issue became my overriding concern and so I ended up wrapping things up a little too quickly. But on a more practical front I think an exercise centred around producing a project proposal like this would have benefitted from me perhaps setting up a screenshare of a PowerPoint document or something similar where I could add people's suggestions as they were made. That document could then have been fashioned into a more concrete proposal with a last round of discussions. Overall, I was simply too passive as a chair to manage things effectively.

Summary of the other sessions

In terms of the other sessions, I think everyone who chaired did a decent job of keeping things moving and allowing people space to make the points they wanted to. There was however a stark contrast in participation levels between the initial sessions, which had open ended questions to answer, versus the later sessions, in which we were given a selection of options to choose from. The later sessions tended to have a much lower participation, including by myself, and that was likely just because the format of these created a lot of overlapping viewpoints, with people having similar reasons for their picks, and once one person had expressed that thought there was little for anyone else to say.

The HER and Correspondence Task sessions that Annie and Zsuzsanna chaired respectively were run in a similar way to mine by going over the brief and then using the prompts from the task document, but they were done so in a superior fashion. Annie was maybe the best chair of those who took on the role, mainly because she was a more active participant in the discussions, putting forward plenty of her own thoughts on the topic, which kept a good flow of discussion going, and Zsuzsanna made a reasonable attempt at trying to draw things into a conclusive set of actions after going with a more freeform opening. These sessions did however have very little 'debate' over any issues, they were largely brainstorming sessions, and I think that we struggled to come to firm conclusions again because of that. Although as a cohort we possess enough general archaeological knowledge to draw up a list of cogent points on a topic, without having the experience of actually dealing with these issues we lacked the understanding of what the key elements of the topic we needed to focus on were,

and so we struggled to then wrangle the mass of ideas we'd generated into the actionable form that was being sought.

The remaining sessions were all ones with a choice between a selection of options, and in the first two this ended up being boiled down to a vote, which was partly why a lower level of discussion took place. This also restricted the input of the chair, with Laura actually being apologetic about voicing an opinion as chair at one point during her session. The process of nominating people to represent each outcome and having them give their reasoning for doing so, followed by a re-vote, which Laura initiated during her session, helped to keep some debate on the topics going though. It also showed the value of still discussing the scenarios rather than relying solely on a vote, as it allowed for people to consider aspects that may not have come to mind during solo deliberations, and some changing of votes did occur when they were re-run. Connor's session went similarly to Laura's, but he was a little more inconsistent in the structuring of his, sometimes just going with a vote, sometimes seeking discussion points, with variability between whether the approving/dissenting side had a say. I'm not sure the outcomes suffered greatly because of this, but it sometimes felt a little more rushed through than Laura's session as a result.

The last session then involved individual assigned roles for people to role-play, which obviously gave everyone an opportunity to take part, but people then almost exclusively commented only on their own 'focus', and there wasn't any real debate at all as a result. Each section just ended with Martin, as chair, going over the positives and negatives of the choices after each participant had made their argument. In the end the problem was that the choice between the options was just never complicated enough to have an impact on anyone else's choices. Everyone knew what each other's answers would be, and could just stick with the answer they'd prepared without being forced to fight their corner or adapt their thinking.

Role-play session failings and real-world meeting dynamics

The key factor that led to the ineffectiveness of these role-play sessions was, as previously mentioned, that they never felt like real meetings. There was never anything at stake, no consequences for failure, and no personal investment in the subject matter. Without these

things no one had any reason to debate points, or engage in lengthy discussions, or be forced to make compromises. Debates like this also require a level of confidence, or at least 'false confidence', in a person's own knowledge and experience with a subject, and when that is lacking in a group they are going to be so apprehensive about the validity of their own points that they will be far less forward about challenging the suggestions of others. This was demonstrated nicely by the fact that on the few occasions where a counterpoint was made it came from a place of personal experience with the matter being discussed, which allowed the person to feel as though they were on firmer ground from which to push back.

Combine this with the fact that this cohort as a whole doesn't really have any 'difficult' characters – there are forthright and occasionally contrarian members, but an absence of idiocy or mean-spiritedness – and this meant these kinds of discussions were always going to be 'idealised' versions of civil 'debate'. I don't however place any real stock in 'personality type' categorisations such as the Myers Briggs or any of those other box sorting exercises. After perusing a selection of papers making claims on the impact of personality traits on team work and leadership (e.g. Brown, 2009; Varvel et al, 2004), and some other angles on project management theory (e.g. Curlee, 2010; Gehring, 2007), I will stick to my belief that people tend to be far more fluid than any of those ideas might claim, and so I don't think this was a matter of too many of the same personality 'type' together. I've seen 'introverts' put forward the most forceful arguments in a room, while 'extroverts' will sit quietly, unbothered. Without anything to ever provoke anyone, rather than lively discussion filled with passionate arguments, we instead ended up with exercises in efficiently finishing a task with as little fuss as possible.

This all stands in contrast to the staff meetings that I have been a part of, such as at ULAS, where there have been occasions where genuine anger is expressed, arguments arisen, and discussions were easily derailed by ego, personal grievances, and just differing ways of approaching tasks. Much of this is again the product of experience. Our cohort has a reasonably narrow range of archaeological experience, having yet to properly grapple with the contentious 'problem areas' of certain matters, and also yet to develop a proper jadedness that can come with having had to deal with certain issues consistently over and over again. None of us in our role as chairs, for example, had to deal with placating someone and refocusing a discussion to get things back on track after we mistakenly stumbled into

someone's touchy subject, or found ourselves suddenly positioned as the figurehead that was expected to have all the answers to problems raised. The sessions all just ran a little too smoothly for that.

Conclusion

I'm aware of how many complications can be thrown into the challenge of delivering a project successfully when meetings go awry, and through the failures of teamworking, but I don't feel as if I learned anything new from these sessions about the intricacies of team dynamics, inside or outside of meetings, or how to navigate difficult situations when working on a project. In truth most of what I learned from these sessions came in the feedback debrief after they ended, when we were talked through the things we'd missed or left underexplored. To be honest I think what may have been more useful would have been to have a knowledgeable hand be part of the actual role-play, guiding us through the debates, intentionally creating issues for us to resolve, or pushing us to think more like project managers in the moment, not just afterwards. Without that, everyone stayed safely in their comfort zones and simply worked to 'complete the exercise', and it felt like a bit of a missed opportunity.

Bibliography

Brown, F.W. and Reilly, M.D. (2009) The Myers-Briggs type indicator and transformational leadership. *Journal of Management Development*, *28*(10), pp.916-932.

Curlee, W. and Gordon, R.L. (2010) *Complexity theory and project management*. John Wiley & Sons: New York.

Gehring, D.R. (2007) Applying traits theory of leadership to project management. *Project management journal*, *38*(1), pp.44-54.

Varvel, T., Adams, S.G., Pridie, S.J. and Ruiz Ulloa, B.C. (2004) Team effectiveness and individual Myers-Briggs personality dimensions. *Journal of management in Engineering*, *20*(4), pp.141-146.